

HR 3155, HR 3219 Offers Enhanced Health and Caregiver Benefits

While restating the promise of working to strengthen veteran's benefits, Congresswoman Debbie Halvorson (IL-11) recently applauded two important bills for veterans passed by the House of Representatives this week. Halvorson along with several colleagues introduced the bills, HR 3155 (Caregiver Assistance and Resource Enhancement Act) and HR 3219 (Veterans' Insurance and Health Care Improvements Act of 2009), and helped lead a large bipartisan group of legislators to the pair of affirmative votes.

"We continue to pass legislation that supports quality of life for our veterans – and these two bills are no different," said Halvorson. "I'm pleased to see this kind of bipartisan effort in addressing the needs of our veterans and I'm committed to do all I can to insure their issues remain a priority."

The *Caregiver Assistance and Resource Enhancement Act* creates a new caregiver program that helps family and non-family members provide care for disabled, ill, or injured veterans enrolled in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care system. The VA will be required to conduct a survey on caregivers in order to better understand this population. Key components of the new caregiver program include support services such as educational sessions, access to a comprehensive one-stop resource directory, counseling and mental health services, and respite care. In addition, this legislation would provide a monthly financial stipend, health care through the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs (CHAMPVA), and lodging and subsistence to eligible caregivers.

"Today, more service members are surviving war injuries than soldiers injured in previous conflicts," said Halvorson. "It is estimated that more than 50 million people are informal caregivers for the chronically ill, disabled or aging family members. This bill helps to insure that those dedicated people providing continuing care to our veterans are granted some much-needed relief – both physically and financially."

Also passing the House today is the *Veterans' Insurance and Health Care Improvements Act of 2009*. It establishes a permanent two-year extension of the free Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance (SGLI) coverage period for totally disabled veterans following separation from active or reserve duty. This piece of the new legislation was

introduced by Halvorson earlier this year as HR 2774 and was granted approval for inclusion into the act. In addition, the bill also allows veterans insured under the Veterans' Group Life Insurance program to increase the amount of their coverage and eliminate the reduction in the amount of accelerated death benefits for terminally-ill persons insured under the SGLI and Veterans' Group Life Insurance programs (VGLI).

If passed into law, the bill also offers key expansions and improvements, including the elimination of co-payments for veterans who are catastrophically disabled, which is taken from the first bill introduced by Halvorson as a member of Congress. The bill, HR 1335 was supported by a bipartisan group of 39 legislators and granted for inclusion into the comprehensive veteran's package offered in HR 3129. Other components of the package include: providing health care for certain *Medal of Honor* recipients who are not eligible for enrollment under the current VA priority group schedule, grants-enhanced treatment authority for certain Vietnam-era herbicide exposed veterans and veterans of the Persian Gulf War, and a \$1,000 monthly payment will be granted to all civilian fighter groups of WWII who were given veteran status under the G.I. Bill Improvement Act of 1977 if appropriations are available.

"As many are aware, I'm passionate about improving the care of our veterans – not only as a legislator and member of the House Veterans Committee, but as a member of a family who has proudly served this country," added Halvorson, adding that the idea for elimination of co-payments for catastrophically disabled veterans partly came from her stepson's injury while in Afghanistan. "I want to assure my son and all the other sons and daughters in the military that I will never forget the service they provided to this country. There is vast support on both sides of the aisle when it comes to many veterans issues and that good progress is being made as they transition to veteran status."

For more information on veteran's issues, the 11th District, or to sign up for Congresswoman Halvorson's newsletter, go to <http://halvorson.house.gov>

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